

**the
vignelli
canon**

massimo vignelli

At the request of the publisher of this book I started to look in to the meaning of such a publication and recognized that it could become a useful instrument for a better understanding of typography in Graphic Design. This little book reveals our guidelines - those set by ourselves for ourselves.

In several teaching situations I remarked the lack of some basic typographic principles in young designers. I thought that it might be useful to pass some of my professional knowledge around, with the hope of improving their design skills. Creativity needs the support of knowledge to be able to perform at its best.

It is not the intention of this book to stifle creativity or to reduce it to a bunch of rules.

It is not the formula that prevents good design from happening but lack of knowledge of the complexity of the Design profession. It's up to the brain to use the proper formula to achieve the desired result.

With great pleasure I look back to all the moments when I learned something new in typography, either from a Master or from fellow practitioners. To have learned about disciplined design from my Swiss fellows, to have learned about the white space from my American fellows, to have learned about the forceful impact of type from my German fellows, to have learned about wit from my English fellows, and then even more from fellows everywhere.

That beautiful feeling of enrichment that comes from new discoveries, new ways of doing the same thing better than before.

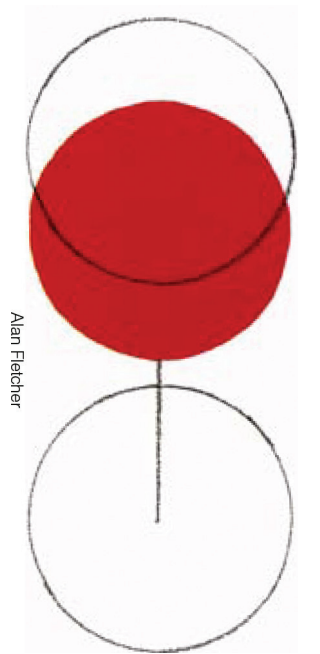
It is my hope that this book may provide that feeling, or in any case confirm and reaffirm those guidelines that we designers love to set for ourselves.

you can say, *I love you*
in Helvetica.

and you can say it with
Helvetica Extra Light if you
want to be really fancy.

or you can say it with the
Extra Bold if it's really
intensive and passionate,
you know,
and it might work.

-massimo vignelli



Alan Fletcher

part one
the intangibles



semantics

visual power

syntactics

intellectual elegance

pragmatics

timelessness

discipline

responsibility

appropriateness

equity

ambiguity

design is one

I have always said that there are three aspects in Design that are important to me: Semantic, Syntactic and Pragmatic.

Let's examine them one at the time. Semantics, for me, is the search of the meaning of whatever we have to design.

The very first thing that I do whenever I start a new assignment in any form of design, graphic, product, exhibition or interior is to search for the meaning of it. That may start with research on the history of the subject to better understand the nature of the project and to find the most appropriate direction for the development of a new design.

Depending on the subject the search can take many directions. It could be a search for more information about the Company, the Product, the Market Position of the subject, the Competition, its Destination, the final user, or indeed, about the real meaning of the subject and its semantic roots.

It is extremely important for a satisfactory result of any design to spend time on the search of the accurate and essential meanings, investigate their complexities, learn about their ambiguities, understand the context of use to better define the parameters within which we will have to operate. In addition to that it is useful to follow our intuition and our diagnostic ability to funnel the research and arrive to a rather conscious definition of the problem at hand.

Semantics are what will provide the real bases for a correct inception of projects, regardless of what they may be. Semantics eventually become an essential part of the designer's being, a crucial component of the natural process of design, and the obvious point of departure for designing. Semantics will also indicate the most appropriate form for that particular subject that we can interpret or transform according to our intentions.

However, it is important to distill the essence of the semantic search through a complex process, most of which is intuitive, to infuse the design with all the required cognitive inputs, effortlessly and in the most natural way possible. It is as in music, when we hear the final sound, without knowing all the processes through which the composer has gone before reaching the final result. Design without semantics is shallow and meaningless but, unfortunately it is also ubiquitous, and that is why it is so important that young designers train themselves to start the design process in the correct way- the only way that can most enrich their design.

Semantics, in design, means to understand the subject in all its aspects; to relate the subject to the sender and the receiver in such a way that it makes sense to both. It means to design something that has a meaning, that is not arbitrary, that has a reason for being, something in which every detail carries the meaning or has a precise purpose aimed at a precise target. How often we see design that has no meaning: stripes and swash of color splashed across pages for no reason whatsoever.

Well, they are either meaningless or incredibly vulgar or criminal when done on purpose. Unfortunately, there are designers and marketing people who intentionally look down on the consumer with the notion that vulgarity has a definite appeal to the masses, and therefore they supply the market with a continuous flow of crude and vulgar design. I consider this action criminal since it is producing visual pollution that is degrading our environment just like all other types of pollution. Not all forms of vernacular communication are necessarily vulgar, although very often that is the case. Vulgarity implies a blatant intention of a form of expression that purposely ignores and bypasses any form of established culture. In our contemporary world it becomes increasingly more difficult to find honest forms of vernacular communication as once existed in the pre-industrial world.

pragmatics

Whatever we do, if not understood, fails to communicate and is wasted effort.

We design things which we think are semantically correct and syntactically consistent but if, at the point of fruition, no one understands the result, or the meaning of all that effort, the entire work is useless. Sometimes it may need some explanation but it is better when not necessary. Any artifact should stand by itself in all its clarity. Otherwise, something really important has been missed. The final look of anything is the by-product of the clarity (or lack of it) during its design phase. It is important to understand the starting point and all assumptions of any project to fully comprehend the final result and measure its efficiency.

Clarity of intent will translate in to clarity of result and that is of paramount importance in Design. Confused, complicated designs reveal an equally confused and complicated mind.

We love complexities but hate complications!

Having said this, I must add that we like Design to be forceful. We do not like limpy design.

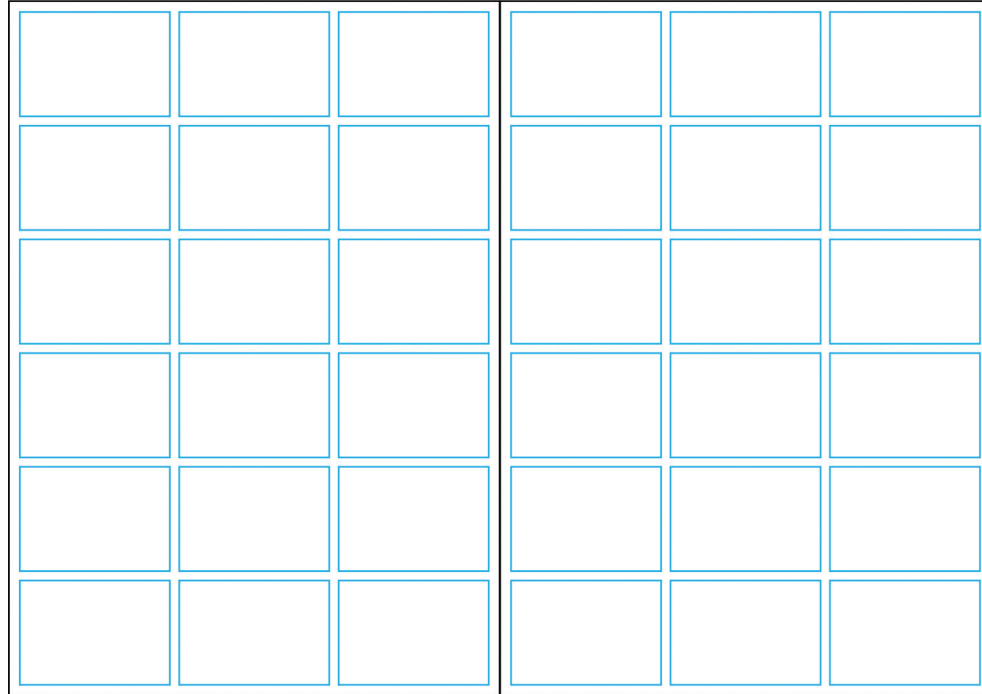
We like Design to be intellectually elegant - that means elegance of the mind, not one of manners, elegance that is the opposite of vulgarity.

We like Design to be beyond fashionable modes and temporary fads. We like Design to be as timeless as possible. We despise the culture of obsolescence. We feel the moral imperative of designing things that will last for a long time.

It is with this set of values that we approach Design everyday, regardless of what it may be: two or three dimensional, large or small, rich or poor. Design is One!



**design without discipline
is anarchy, an exercise
in irresponsibility.**

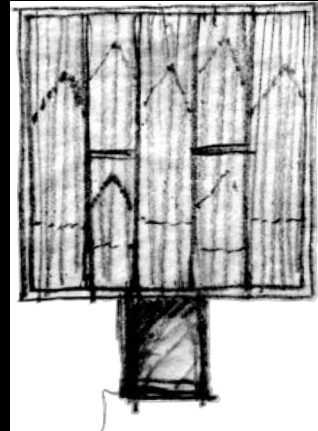


**The attention to details
requires discipline.**

There is no room for sloppiness, for carelessness, for procrastination. Every detail is important because the end result is the sum of all the details involved in the creative process no matter what we are doing. There are no hierarchies when it comes to quality. Quality is there or is not there, and if is not there we have lost our time. It is a commitment and a continuously painstaking effort of the creative process to which we should abide. That is Discipline and without it there is no good design, regardless of its style.

Discipline is a set of self imposed rules, parameters within which we operate. It is a bag of tools that allows us to design in a consistent manner from beginning to end. Discipline is also an attitude that provides us with the capacity of controlling our creative work so that it has continuity of intent throughout rather than fragmentation. Design without discipline is anarchy, an exercise of irresponsibility.

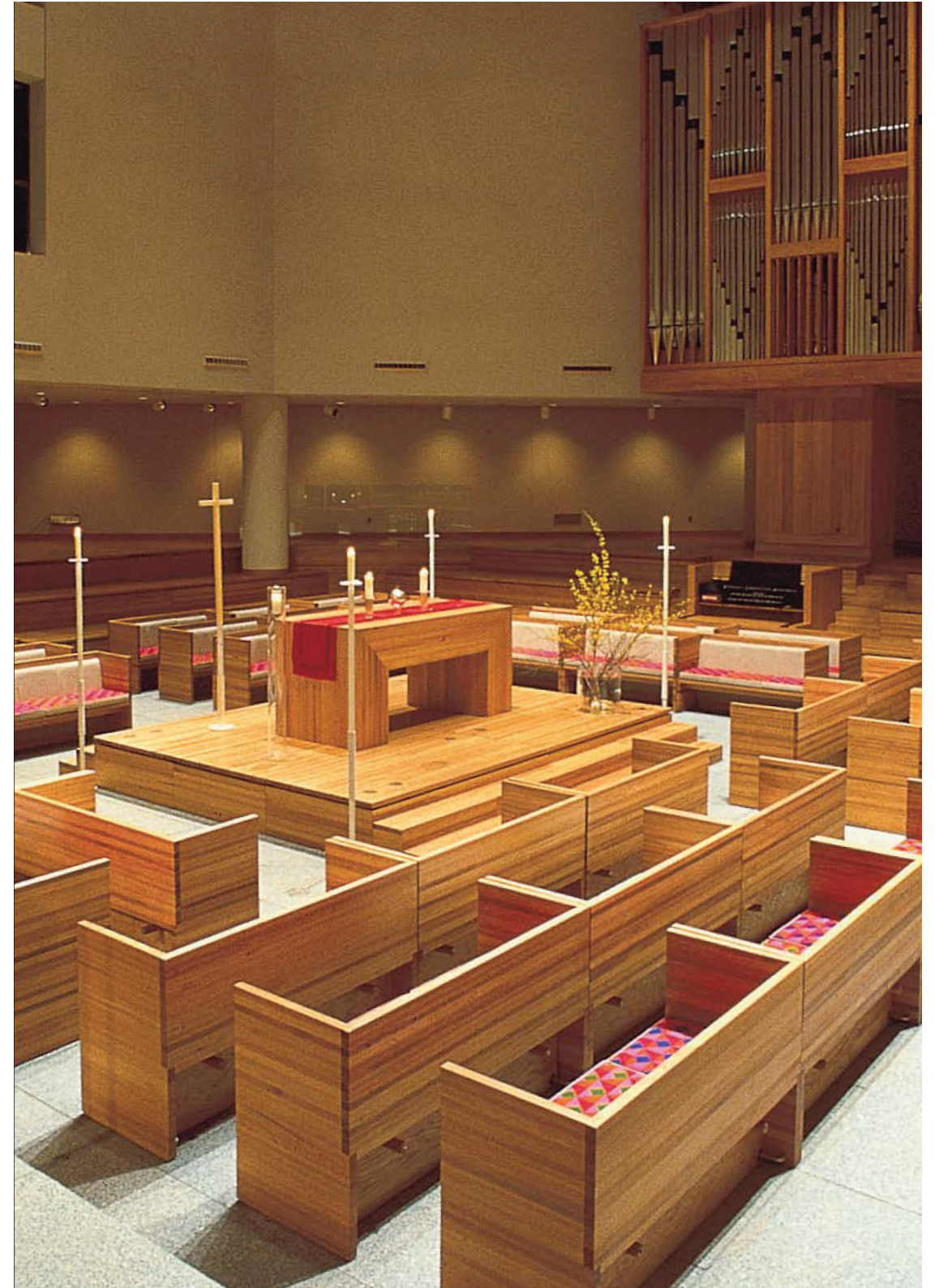
The notion of appropriateness is consequent to what I have expressed. Once we search the roots of whatever we have to design we are also defining the area of possible solutions that are appropriate -specific to that particular problem. Actually, we can say that appropriateness is the search for the specific of any given problem. To define that prevents us from taking wrong directions, or alternative routes that lead to nowhere or even worse, to wrong solutions.



Appropriateness directs us to the right kind of media, the right kind of materials, the right kind of scale, the right kind of expression, color and texture. Appropriateness elicits the enthusiastic approval of the client seeing the solution to his problem. Appropriateness transcends any issue of style - there are many ways of solving a problem, many ways of doing, but the relevant thing is that, no matter what, the solution must be appropriate. I think that we have to listen to what a thing wants to be, rather than contrive it in to an arbitrary confinement. However, sometimes there may be other rules that one must follow to achieve the correct level of continuity.

At least for me, this is a relevant issue which very often determines the look of the project to be designed. This issue is one of the fundamental principles of our Canon.

During the post-modern time, the verb “to be appropriate” assumed the meaning of borrowing something and transforming it by placing it in a different context. We could say that this kind of “appropriation” when appropriate, could be done - just another way of solving a problem or expressing creativity.

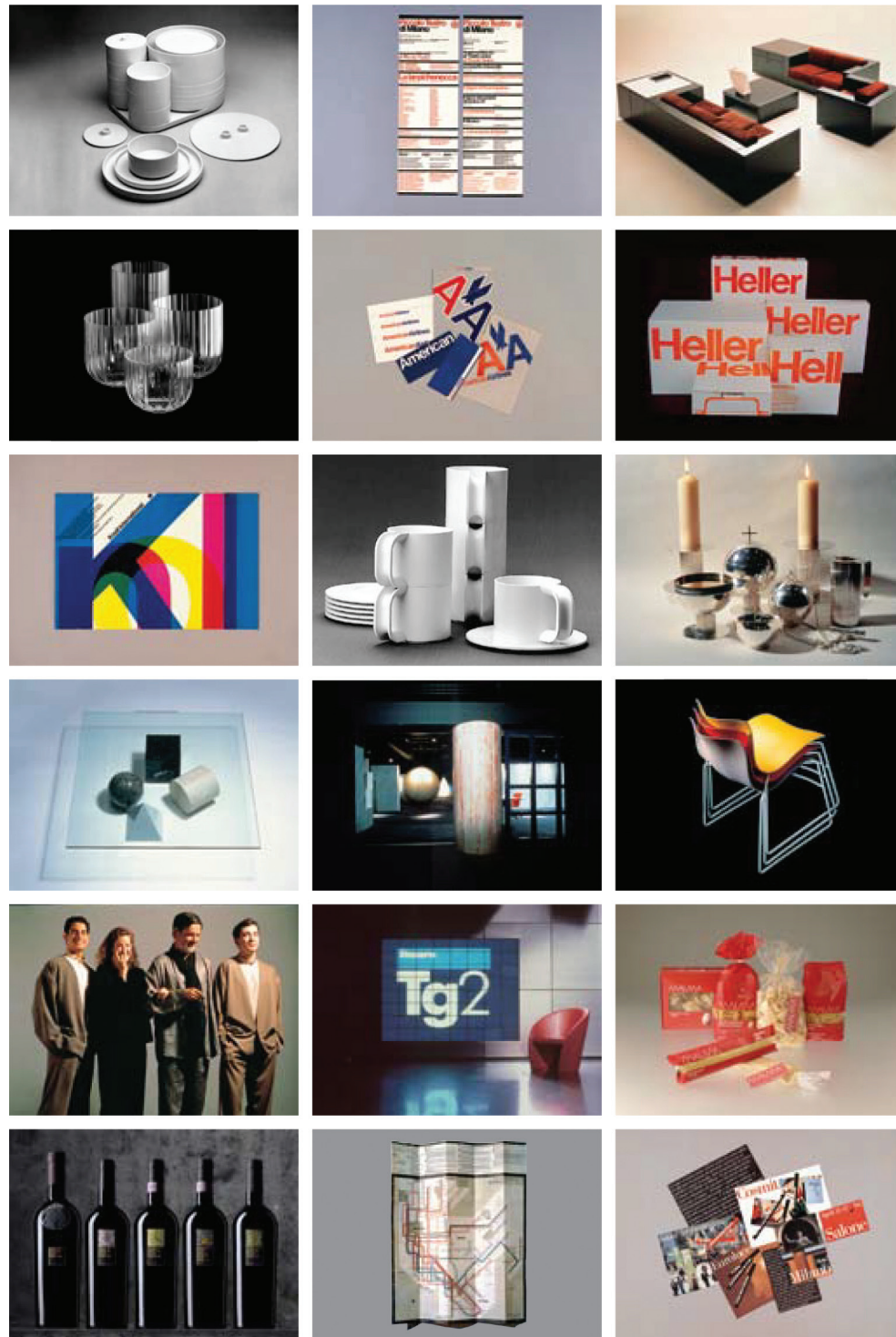


Rather than the negative connotation of ambiguity as a form of vagueness, I have a positive interpretation of ambiguity, intended as a plurality of meanings, or the ability of conferring to an object or a design, the possibility of being read in different ways - each one complementary to the other to enrich the subject and give more depth. We often use this device to enhance the expression of the design and we treasure the end results.

However, one has to be cautious in playing with ambiguity because if not well measured it can backfire with unpleasant results. Contradiction can sometimes reinforce ambiguity, but more often it is a sign of discontinuity and lack of control. Ambiguity and contradiction can enrich a project but can equally sink the end results.

Therefore, great caution is recommended in using these spices.

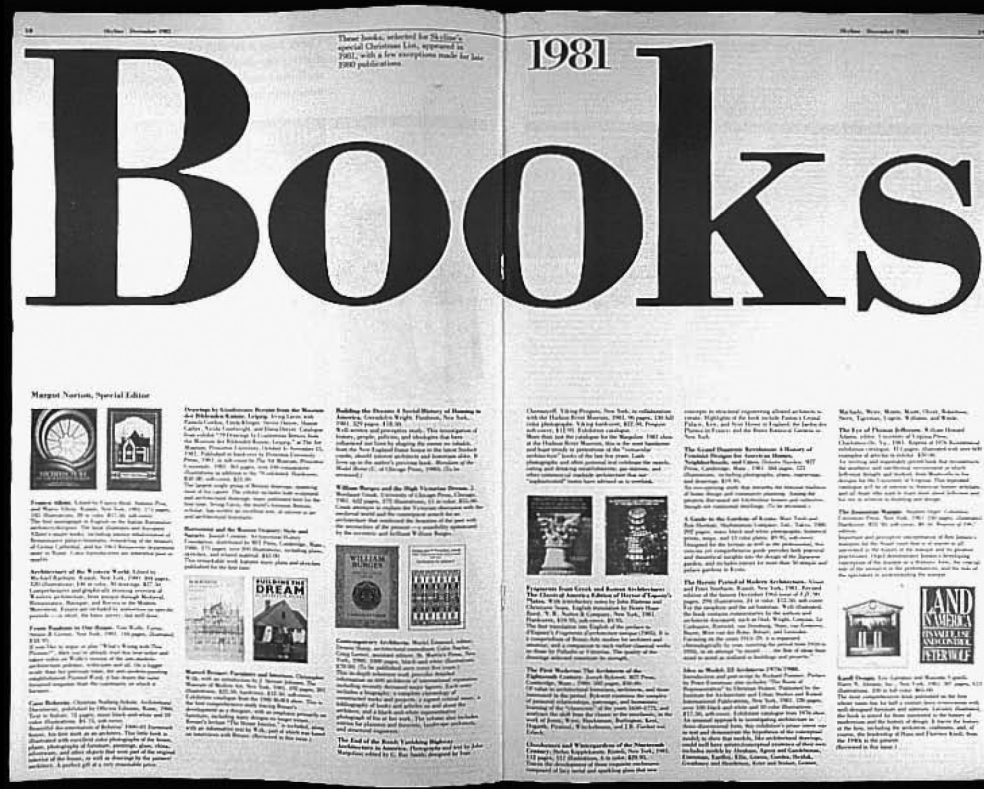




The office of the Castiglioni Architects in Milano was the first place, where at the age of 16, I went to work as a draftsman. They were active in the whole field of Design and Architecture following the Adolph Loos dictum that an Architect should be able to design everything “from the spoon to the city.” They had already designed a very iconic radio, beautiful silver flatware, camping furniture, witty stools, industrial bookshelves, nice houses and an incredible museum. Later they designed restaurants, trade shows, exhibitions, furniture and much more. They became the icons of Italian Design. I strongly recommend to all designers to investigate and study their work. I was tremendously impressed by the diversity of projects and immediately fascinated by the Architect’s possibility of working in so many different areas. I discovered that what is important is to master a design discipline to be able to design anything, because that is what is essential and needed on every project.

Design is one - it is not many different ones. The discipline of Design is one and can be applied to many different subjects, regardless of style. Design discipline is above and beyond any style. All styler requires discipline in order to be expressed. Very often people think that Design is a particular style. Nothing could be more wrong! Design is a discipline, a creative process with its own rules, controlling the consistency of its output toward its objective in the most direct and expressive way.

Throughout my life I have hunted opportunities to diversify my design practice: from glass to metal, from wood to pottery to plastics, from printing to packaging, from furniture to interiors, from clothing to costumes, from exhibitions to stage design and more. Everything was, and still is, a tempting challenge to test the interaction between intuition and knowledge, between passion and curiosity, between desire and success.



visual power

We say all the time that we like Design to be visually powerful. We cannot stand Design that is weak in concept, form, color, texture or any or all of them. We think good Design is always an expression of creative strength bringing forward clear concepts expressed in beautiful form and color, where every element expresses the content in the most forceful way.

There are infinite possibilities to achieve a powerful expression. In graphic design, for instance, difference of scale within the same page can give a very strong impact. Bold type contrasting with light type creates visually dynamic impressions. We have used this approach successfully in our graphic design.

In three dimensional design, manipulating light through different textures and materials gives infinite and effective results. Changing scale and contrasting sizes provide an impressive array of possibilities.

It is essential that a design is imbued with visual strength and unique presence to achieve its purpose. Visual strength can be achieved also by using delicate layouts or materials. Visual strength is an expression of intellectual elegance and should never be confused with just visual impact - which, most of the time, is just an expression of visual vulgarity and obtrusiveness.

Visual power is, in any event, a subject which deserves great attention to achieve effective design.

intellectual elegance

We often talk about Intellectual Elegance, not to be confused with the elegance of manners and mores. For me, intellectual elegance is the sublime level of intelligence which has produced all the masterpieces in the history of mankind.

It is the elegance we find in Greek statues, in Renaissance paintings, in the sublime writings of Goethe, and many great creative minds.

It is the elegance of Architecture of any period, the Music of all times, the clarity of Science through the ages. It is the thread that guides us to the best solution of whatever we do. It is the definitive goal of our minds - the one beyond compromises.

It elevates the most humble artifact to a noble stand. Intellectual elegance is also our civic consciousness, our social responsibility, our sense of decency, our way of conceiving Design, our moral imperative. Again, it is not a design style, but the deepest meaning and the essence of Design.



**we are definitively against
any fashion of design and
any design fashion.**



We are definitively against any fashion of design and any design fashion. We despise the culture of obsolescence, the culture of waste, the cult of the ephemeral. We detest the demand of temporary solutions, the waste of energies and capital for the sake of novelty.

We are for a Design that lasts, that responds to people's needs and to people's wants. We are for a Design that is committed to a society that demands long lasting values. A society that earns the benefit of commodities and deserves respect and integrity.

We like the use of primary shapes and primary colors because their formal values are timeless. We like a typography that transcends subjectivity and searches for objective values, a typography that is beyond times - that doesn't follow trends, that reflects its content in an appropriate manner. We like economy of design because it avoids wasteful exercises, it respects investment and lasts longer. We strive for a Design that is centered on the message rather than visual titillation. We like Design that is clear, simple and enduring. And that is what timelessness means in Design.



responsibility

In graphic design the issue of responsibility assumes particular importance as a form of economic awareness toward the most appropriate solution to a given problem.

Too often we see printed works produced in a lavish manner just to satisfy the ego of designers or clients. It is important that an economically appropriate solution is used and is one that takes in proper consideration all the facets of the problem.

As much as this may seem obvious it is one of the most overlooked issues by both designers and clients. Responsibility is another form of discipline. As designers, we have three levels of responsibility:

One - to ourselves, the integrity of the project and all its components.

Two - to the Client, to solve the problem in a way that is economically sound and efficient.

Three - to the public at large, the consumer, the user of the final design. On each one of these levels we should be ready to commit ourselves to reach the most appropriate solution, the one that solves the problem without compromises for the benefit of everyone.

In the end, a design should stand by itself, without excuses, explanations, apologies. It should represent the fulfillment of a successful process in all its beauty.

A responsible solution.

equity

Many times we have been asked to design a logo or a symbol for a Company - often at the request of the marketing department to refresh the Company's position in the marketplace.

Although this may be a legitimate request, very often, it is motivated by the desire of change merely for the sake of change, and that is a very wrong motivation.

A real Corporate Identity is based on an overall system approach, not just a logo.

A logo gradually becomes part of our collective culture; in its modest way it becomes part of all of us. Think of Coca Cola, think of Shell, or, why not, American Airlines. When a logo has been in the public domain for more than fifty years it becomes a classic, a landmark, a respectable entity and there is no reason to throw it away and substitute it with a new concoction, regardless of how well it has been designed.

Perhaps, because I grew up in a country where history and vernacular architecture were part of culture of the territory and was protected, I considered established logos something to be equally protected.

The notion of a logo equity has been with us from the very beginning of time. When we were asked to design a new logo for the FORD Motor Company, we proposed a light retouch of the old one which could be adjusted for contemporary applications. We did the same for CIGA HOTELS, CINZANO, LANCIA Cars and others. There was no reason to dispose of logos that had seventy years of exposure, and were rooted in people's consciousness with a set of respectable connotations.

What is new is NOT a graphic form but a way of thinking, a way of showing respect for history in a context that usually has zero understanding for these values.

